

North Georgia News

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Decker, Webb achieve STAR Student honors

By Daysha Pandolph
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Congratulations to seniors Eli Decker of Union County High School and Aidan Webb of Woody Gap School for being named STAR Student for their respective classes of 2024.

For a high school senior to earn STAR status, he or she must score highest among their classmates in any single sitting of the three-part SAT by November of their senior year while being in the top 10% or Top 10 students of their class based on GPA.

Uchs STAR Student Eli Decker is a high-achieving member of the school's STEM program, taking nearly all honors courses and dual enrollment due to his

involvement in the program. He is also a member of the soccer team.

"It's really nice (to get this honor), because I always apply myself in school," Decker said. "I never really thought that I was going to be at the point where I would be competing at the top to get something like this. It's just rewarding."

Decker selected Jared Kelley to serve as his STAR Teacher, meaning that he feels Kelley has been the most instrumental in his academic development.

"I had Mr. Kelley twice in high school – freshman year for physics, and this year for AP physics," Decker said. "I really just enjoyed the fact that he is always so engaged with

his students. (I appreciate) his commitment to his students and teaching."

Kelley has been teaching for 11 years, six of which he has spent at UCHS; however, he is a first-time STAR Teacher. He met Decker nearly four years ago and was amazed by his first impressions.

"He definitely stood out in a class that was already advanced in itself," Kelley said. "He's in the STEM program – which they're all together the kids with the highest aptitude – and he was standing out among that group as a freshman. (He is) hardworking, diligent and willing to lead others down that same path."

After graduation this spring, Decker plans on attending the Georgia Institute

of Technology to major in either mechanical or aerospace engineering.

From just over the mountain in Suches, Woody Gap School is proud to present their STAR Student, Aidan Webb, who is also a high-achieving student furthering his education through dual-enrollment college courses.

Webb is extremely active in his school, participating in multiple extracurriculars such as basketball, tennis, cross country and band.

"(Making STAR Student) is an important accomplishment because it proves how much I have worked to get here," Webb said.

He selected Jason Serrano, who has been teaching



Woody Gap Senior Aidan Webb and Union County High School Senior Eli Decker are this year's STAR Students for Union County Schools. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

Mull, Tanner crowned in Basketball Homecoming



UCHS 2024 Basketball Homecoming Queen Kamryn Mull and King Caiden Tanner were pleasantly surprised to be selected as school royalty Saturday. Photo by Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Sports Editor

Union County High School crowned seniors Caiden Tanner and Kamryn Mull as 2023-24 Basketball Homecoming King and Queen before the start of varsity

matches on Saturday, Jan. 13. Mull is the daughter of Jamey Mull, Ashley Davis and John Davis.

"I was very surprised when they announced my name," Mull said. "This means a lot. I want to thank all my friends and everyone that voted

for me, and for giving me the opportunity to represent them."

Tanner is the son of Jeff and Penny Tanner.

"This means a lot to me," Tanner said. "I love all my classmates, and they have made my four years of high school a blast. I want to thank all of them for making my four years at UCHS the best, and I wouldn't have wanted to do it with anyone else."

Joining Mull and Tanner on the court were seniors Reese Chambers, Jensen Goble, Lane Lance, Jewell Massey, Connor Swanson and Morgan Warren.

Junior representatives were Aubrie Akins, Hensley Adams, Jude Ellis, Houston Henry, Jayden Karnes and Jack Wilson.

Sophomores were Mady Adams, Khloe Ashcraft and Trent Webster.

Freshman reps were Ella Akins, Izzy Anthros, Jakob Brown and Ethan Hogsed.

Last year's king and queen, Eli Underwood and Jaycee Seabolt, were in attendance to crown Tanner and Mull.

Fisher Field bridge raises questions for residents

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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The county bridge over Nottely River at Fisher Field Road needs emergency replacement, and residents there are wondering how things got to this point.

Union County Government learned of the

issue in early September and has been working on an expedited timeline to have a new bridge in place by April or May, with a temporary bridge to be installed "as soon as possible," potentially by sometime next month.

Located just off Georgia 348, the Fisher Field bridge is the only way in or out for dozens

of Union Countians. According to neighborhood resident Steve Allen, the existing bridge was built in 1980 to replace an old wooden bridge that was swept away during a flood.

And while the single-lane bridge functioned well enough for decades, it has deteriorated over the years, suffering

See Fisher Field Bridge, Page 4A



The Fisher Field Road bridge is suffering from extensive corrosion and is in the process of being replaced. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

UCSO hosting Scam, Fraud Awareness Class Jan. 23

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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The Union County Sheriff's Office is inviting everyone in the community to attend a Scam & Fraud Awareness Class on Tuesday, Jan. 23, at 2 p.m. inside the Union County Community Center.

Co-hosted by United Community Bank, the class aims to inform the public about the types of scams that have become rampant – often targeting the elderly – and provide information as to how people can recognize and avoid scams and fraud.

United Community will make available bank representatives who specialize in fraud investigations, and the Sheriff's Office will be handing out Georgia Consumer Protection Guides and other information on how to stay safe in an era of cold-call scam artists and online fraud.

"This is open to the public; anybody that would like to attend, please attend," UCSO Maj. Shawn Dyer said. "People will hear not only from us but from United Community on what a severe impact this has



on the banking system as well as individuals."

When Dyer says everyone is invited, he means it; scams often target the elderly for their lack of familiarity with technology and greater likelihood of having monetary resources, but younger people need to be aware of scams, too, in order to protect themselves and their older relatives.

Leading the class will be UCSO Inv. Robert Calamari, who has been with the Sheriff's Office for about a year.

Calamari retired to Union County after serving for 25 years in multiple law enforcement capacities, including patrol duties in California and investigative work in Florida, and he came out of retirement to work

for UCSO as a part of the courthouse security detail.

In December, Maj. Dyer transitioned Calamari to the Criminal Investigation Division to focus on the growing volume of calls by residents being scammed, making him the first local investigator dedicated to handling scam and fraud cases.

"His main job description is educating the public, working these scams, and trying to get this to where we can lessen our numbers," Dyer said. "Hopefully, in the future, we're going to have a fraud line that will direct you straight here, because it's become that big of an issue."

And Calamari hit the ground running. Already, he has visited all the local places that would issue gift cards, money orders or conduct wire transfers – banks, grocery stores, pharmacies, etc. – to alert them about what the Sheriff's Office is doing to prevent local scams and frauds.

He has also reached out to the Senior Center, Branan Lodge and other places to educate seniors directly on scam prevention.

As part of his presentation

See Fraud Awareness, Page 3A

Campus closures, power outages attend wintry weather

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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2024 has produced some wacky weather so far, including a storm system last week that resulted in two days of campus closures for area schools and, this week, a winter weather advisory calling for a chance of freezing rain Monday, Jan. 15, into Tuesday, plus subfreezing lows over the week.

Already, it's shaping up to be a very cold winter, with nighttime and early morning slippery road conditions possibly accompanying any precipitation that falls.

By press time Monday, the National Weather Service forecasted lows of 7 degrees for Tuesday night and into the teens Wednesday night, with a 70% chance of precipitation and a low of 27 degrees on Thursday, and possibly snow overnight into Friday.

Friday night temperatures are expected to dip into the single digits again, but according to the weather service, with the exception of Tuesday, highs should remain above freezing until Saturday, which will likely see a high



Local first responders and others, like Union County Schools and Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, attended a pair of weather briefings at Station 1 last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

near 31 degrees and sunny skies.

Below normal temperatures for this time of year have been projected at least into next week, so be sure to bundle up and pay careful attention to road conditions.

Last week, the Union County Emergency Management Agency opened its Emergency Operations Center at Fire Station No. 1 for special weather briefings by NWS Peachtree City, welcoming in leaders and representatives

from all sectors of the county that serve the public.

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, Union County Schools, Union County Government, Fire Department, Road Department, Sheriff's Office, Blairsville Police, Union General Hospital, 911 Dispatch, City of Blairsville and other organizations attended.

There were two storm systems last week, one that moved in the evening of Monday, Jan. 8, bringing with

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Fraud Awareness...from Page 1A

next week, Calamari will go over many examples of scams as well as some of the local cases he has investigated since beginning his new position. To date, he has worked over two dozen scam and fraud calls, with no end in sight.

Calamari is hoping that raising awareness through the class and other community outreach initiatives will arm people with the information they need to keep from becoming victims of scams and fraud, whether over the phone or online.

One focus of the class will be the potential for scams on e-commerce platforms like Facebook Marketplace and Craigslist, where consumer protections are virtually nonexistent.

There are other scams where people are told they need to use gift cards or money orders to pay for something urgent, like a hoax outstanding bill, tech support for fabricated computer issues, bogus inmate bonding for relatives, etc.

Scammers request

gift cards and money orders because, once redeemed, they are non-reversible, unlike transactions made through banks that can potentially be canceled and/or reversed.

Other common scams to be covered in the class include "imposters" pretending to be the IRS, Social Security, Medicare, bill collectors, debt collectors, funeral homes, sweepstakes operators, romantic interests, pet sellers, etc.

There's no shortage of imagination being employed by criminals to take advantage of people who don't know how to protect themselves, and because scams often originate internationally, re-claiming stolen money and bringing scammers to justice are made even more difficult.

And while the Sheriff's Office investigates every reported scam case - and has been able to make some recoveries - the ultimate goal is to help people avoid being scammed by knowing what to do in situations where someone is soliciting money from them over the phone or online.

"The only way to prevent it is public awareness," Maj. Dyer said.

For people who can't make the Jan. 23 class, Inv. Calamari and the Sheriff's Office plan to host it multiple times this year and are willing to come speak with any group requesting to learn more about the topic, like churches, businesses, assisted living facilities and nonprofit organizations.

Maj. Dyer said that the Sheriff's Office is also working with Union County Schools to host classes for kids about protecting their privacy online and avoiding sexual exploitation on the internet - another major problem in today's increasingly connected world.

Residents may report scams or fraud to Calamari by calling the Sheriff's Office at 706-439-6066, ext. 3119.

Internet crimes can be reported at <https://www.ic3.gov/>, which is the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center. People can also have their phone number placed on the National Do Not Call Registry at <https://www.donotcall.gov/>, which targets telemarketer activity.

AARP Tax Aide Free Tax Preparation



AARP Tax Aide is providing free tax preparation in Blairsville on Wednesdays from 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. beginning February 7 through April 10. Location is the Brackett Community Room, behind United Community Bank, 177 GA-515, Blairsville, GA.

This service is by appointment only. Please call (770) 403-7959 for reservations.

Other AARP Tax Aide locations are: Blue Ridge on Fridays from 10:00 - 2:00, February 9 - April 12 at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 7 Ewing Street, Blue Ridge; Ellijay on Mondays from 10:00 - 2:00, February 12 - April 8 at the Gilmer County Library, 268 Calvin Jackson Drive, Ellijay.

Blue Ridge and Ellijay are also by appointment only. Please call (770) 312-2258 for reservations at these locations.

Kappa Alpha Honors Marie Geesa



Marie Geesa

Members of the Blairsville Kappa Alpha chapter of the international women's society Beta Sigma Phi recently honored Marie Geesa of Blairsville for her contributions to Beta Sigma Phi and especially to the local Kappa Alpha chapter.

One member stated, "Marie is a treasure! Her knowledge and insight have been invaluable to our chapter and we love her dearly." Cards and notes of appreciation were delivered to Marie along with a flower arrangement. We love you, Marie!

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Fisher Field Bridge...from Page 1A



The bridge has been in poor structural shape for years now, with replacement coming after the state put the county on notice.

heavy corrosion in the steel elements of the superstructure and substructure, as well as shoulder washing behind the bridge and under the roadway.

These conditions have prompted the Georgia Department of Transportation to issue the county an ultimatum to either solve the bridge problem or close it and potentially lose state road funding.

GDOT inspects the county's bridges about every two years, most recently in August 2023. The poor condition of the bridge dates to at least 2017, according to a state report, though GDOT felt compelled to act after last year's inspection.

That's why State Bridge Engineer Donn Digamon told the county late last August to reduce the weight limit of the bridge to 3 tons from the previous 17-ton maximum and the speed limit to 5 mph and to get to work repairing or replacing the bridge.

The reductions were posted Sept. 27, and to put the new load limit into perspective, many full-size pickup trucks weigh more than 3 tons, or 6,000 pounds, so the reduced maximum load of the bridge severely limits the types of vehicles the state believes can safely cross.

Not only are residents concerned for their personal wellbeing when crossing the bridge — many have been consolidating trips and taking smaller vehicles to town to avoid stressing the structure — but people have questions about access to services available to other property taxpayers.

Ambulances, firetrucks, propane trucks and delivery vans are some of the indispensable vehicles that require access to the neighborhood that's home to over 30 residents plus others who own land there, but these vehicles are technically restricted from using the bridge, per the state.

Fortunately, the county has committed to making sure these services remain

uninterrupted when needed; paramedics will respond and get to homes however they can, and Fire Chief David Dyer said his department's trucks will roll across the bridge in the event of a fire or other emergency.

"Even if we have to wade the creek, our emergency people will respond, and they will get the people out to a safe place and get them in the ambulance," County Manager Larry Garrett said.

Several residents who heat their homes with propane have been wondering if their supplies will last the winter, but Garrett said the county will ensure people get their propane — and anything else they need that may be limited by the current bridge.

There are no bus routes that go over the Fisher Field bridge, but there are families in the neighborhood that have car-riding students, and for these households and others, getting a solution in place cannot come soon enough.

In the meantime, Union County Government is working in earnest to solve the issue, having declared the situation an emergency to expedite the process.

According to Garrett, to construct a brand-new bridge on the spot would take at least a year, perhaps longer, and the urgency of the problem demands a quicker solution considering the advanced deterioration of the bridge and reduced weight limit.

So, the county has ordered a prefabricated bridge that is expected to arrive in April, and Garrett said he's hoping to have a temporary bridge installed in four to five weeks to alleviate the concerns of the families living behind the bridge until the new one is permanently in place.

But the bridge issues have been officially reported to the county by the state for multiple years now, so why did it take state action and threats of closure for the county to finally initiate a remedy?

Speaking on behalf of

Union County Government, County Manager Garrett and Purchasing Agent Pam Hawkins of the Commissioner's Office said they're trying to figure that out.

According to Garrett and Hawkins, there appears to have been a breakdown in communication between the Road Department and county government.

Garrett said the first time he heard about the bridge problem was in a letter sent by the state to the Commissioner's Office. Dated Aug. 29 and received by Garrett on Sept. 6, the letter gave notice of the reduced weight/speed limits, and he called GDOT right away and started planning.

The state's bridge reports had apparently only been going to the Road Department, and it was unclear at press time how those were handled by staff there, though Garrett and Hawkins said last week they would get to the bottom of the issue.

Regardless, Garrett reiterated that the Commissioner's Office had not been alerted by the Road Department or the state until receipt of the state's letter. He has since notified GDOT to copy the Commissioner's Office on all bridge inspection reports moving forward.

Further, Garrett and Hawkins said that some policy changes may be in order at the Road Department, to be determined later once they sort out the apparent breakdown in communication.

"We're trying to figure out (what happened), but in the meantime, we've got an emergency on our hands," Hawkins said. "If the staff that runs the Road Department determined that nothing needed to be done and they didn't communicate any further, we've got to figure out why."

Added Hawkins, "We're trying to deal with that, and (Commissioner Lamar Paris) knows that and is aware of that. We're not blaming anybody, it's just, maybe there was a miscommunication. I have no idea — we're trying to figure that out."

In his Nov. 16 regular meeting, Paris executed a contract with Carter Engineering Consultants Inc., which has worked on other county projects. Effective Oct. 26, the \$8,000 contract secured structural and civil engineering services to determine a fix for the situation.

Carter Engineering decided that the best and quickest solution would be to order a prefabricated bridge, to be built off-site and transported to the location to cut down on weather impacts to construction timetables and the amount of time crews must be on-site.

Paris then ordered the prefabricated bridge in a Dec. 11 called meeting, contracting with Contech Engineered Solutions for \$132,400. At the time, the bridge was estimated to take about 17 weeks to build based on the specifications provided by Carter Engineering.

Carter Engineering recommended Contech, which is how the bridge company came on the county's radar, Hawkins said.

An expenditure this large would normally require bidding, but since the county declared an emergency over the bridge, bids were not required, Hawkins said, thereby saving even more time in getting a new bridge in place.

The new bridge will be superior in quality to the old bridge, Garrett said, but with a 16-ton max load versus the old posted max of 17 tons. And though residents of Fisher Field and its offshoots were hoping for an upgrade, the new bridge will be comparable while restoring access for them.

One more expenditure has been approved so far for the project, a \$6,750 contract with Geo-Hydro Engineers Inc. "to perform subsurface exploration and a geotechnical engineering evaluation" for the bridge replacement.

The project is being paid for with SPLOST funds, having already accrued \$147,150 in costs, though the final bill will undoubtedly be much larger, to include installation of the new bridge and expenditures for the temporary bridge.

Now, the county will be working with property owners near the bridge to secure temporary easements for construction on the permanent and temporary bridges, and with utility companies to make sure everything is ready to go when the new bridge is delivered.

Importantly, the state has deemed the existing bridge safe enough to cross, albeit at reduced weights and speeds, but getting the temporary bridge installed — designs for which could be completed this week — will likely ease safety concerns in the short-term.

"We're trying to do what's right," Hawkins said. "We're trying to do it quickly, we're trying to make sure the laws are abided by, trying to make sure that people are taken care of."

"We're trying to get all the ducks in a row to make this happen as quickly as possible and assure the public and the people that live out there, all the residents, that they don't have anything to worry about."

"We've got them. We're going to take care of them. They don't have to do without. We're getting this done as fast as we can, but don't worry; we're handling this as best we can."

In a worst-case scenario, if the bridge were to collapse before a new crossing can be established, Garrett said the county would move in immediately to install a temporary bridge.

"If the bridge falls in, I'll do whatever it takes," Garrett said. "At that point in time, it's no longer deemed an emergency — it is the emergency. I'll have culverts up there as quick as we can get them ordered and put in

there (to make a bridge)."

The Commissioner's Office has recently become aware of two other county bridges with similar structural deficiency ratings and is planning how best to address those at present, though only the Fisher Field bridge has deteriorated to the point of the state calling for immediate action.

"I'm sorry that any bridge got to this (point), and I apologize," Garrett said.

Hearing From Residents

Since learning of the bridge issue, Garrett has been in contact with multiple residents off Fisher Field Road. One resident, who asked not to be named, said they were happy with the way the Commissioner's Office has been handling the situation.

Other residents, however, are upset that it has taken this long to do something, with some of them saying they have repeatedly contacted the county about the bridge without seeing results.

"Several of us have contacted Lamar Paris and Larry Garrett to request assistance particularly over the past two years as fiber optic installation, home repairs, construction on two new homes, and routine services have resulted in multiple heavy vehicles and equipment traversing across our bridge," resident Lynne Pike said.

"This additional heavy traffic as well as flooding, erosion, and fallen trees have further damaged our steep, curved, single-lane mountain road scheduled for resurfacing perhaps in a couple of years if we're lucky."

Steve Allen, who has called the Road Department about the bridge and road many times over the years, said he has plenty of concerns right now, starting with safety.

"I just want the neighborhood to be safe," Allen said. "And I'd like more information from the county on what they do in emergencies — not just Fisher Field, but somebody else's neighborhood that's one way in, one way out."

Another thing Allen is seeking is better communication from the county about what's going on there, including information on next steps. He believes the commissioner could put residents' minds more at ease with direct outreach, like a mailed letter simply explaining things.

He's also hoping the county will be able to preserve, as much as possible, the natural setting along the river during construction, with restoration of the area to its original condition once the new bridge is installed.

Residents Leroy and Tammy Lehman have been concerned about the bridge since the state imposed reduced weight and speed limits. The Lehmans said last week they knew the bridge wasn't in great shape but didn't realize the extent of the damage until then.

"I would definitely say I'm scared when I go across, because it looks like there's a dip on both sides of the bridge as you enter and exit," Leroy said. "It seems like it's taking quite an effort to get this done, because nothing's been done

as of today.

"But I think the county knew about it for a while because, sometime last year, they came out and dumped a whole bunch of big rocks on one side to try to shore up the bank or something. I thought, I wonder why they did that? But nobody explained it."

Tammy said that while transparency has improved, she initially got "the runaround" from the county in her inquiries about the bridge, having heard from the Road Department at one point that repairing the bridge "was the state's responsibility." That turned out not to be the case.

"I don't want to bash the county," Tammy said. "All I want to say is that we have enough people on this side of the bridge that, if that bridge goes down, this is devastating to us."

Responding to complaints that the county has been unresponsive to residents' concerns, Hawkins said, "If somebody says, 'I have been trying for two years to get in touch with the Commissioner's Office about this,' come in, please. See me or Larry; we'll sit down with you."

"And I'd love to know, who did you talk to?" Hawkins continued. "Because if I have a problem with somebody not returning your phone calls, we've got an employee problem."

Added Garrett, "If someone contacts me about any bridge, any road in this county, I will contact the Road Department and they will call you. If you don't get your situation resolved, call me back. My number is 706-781-5660. Call me back — that is the standard procedure."

Ultimately, Garrett said he understands that the county needs "to do a better job of communicating to the public."

"We know that, and we are addressing that," Garrett said. "I live in this community — I want to do what's right."

Road Complaints

Multiple residents on Fisher Field Road believe the county has neglected not only their bridge but also their roadway, which in the past has been patched but suffers from multiple issues that can likely only be resolved with more extensive work.

"We don't want a patch," Allen said. "When the water runs down that road on the right side, there's cavities that water runs in. If they think they're going to re-do Fisher Field and just pave over — what's the problem underneath before you spend your money on the top side?"

The neighborhood shares a chat group on the Next Door social media app, where one resident reported last summer that Commissioner Paris had visited the road and pledged to repair it before completely repaving it in two years — which they hope actually comes to pass.

Per Garrett, the county paves as it can, working from a list of roads recommended by the Road Department and using limited LMIG funds made available by the state, and not all roads on the list can be paved in any given year.



The weight and speed limits for the bridge were reduced last fall, presenting a major setback for residents living behind it on Fisher Field Road.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

House Speaker Burns calls for more changes to state election laws: "...give voters confidence..."

By Dave Williams
Capitol Beat News Service

ATLANTA — Georgia voters can expect further "tweaks" to state elections laws this year, House Speaker Jon Burns said Wednesday, Jan. 10.

House Republican leaders will push to eliminate QR codes from the paper ballots voting machines spit out to voters after they cast their ballots and consider strengthening the powers of the State Election Board, potentially at the expense of the secretary of state, said Burns, R-Newington.

The General Assembly passed legislation in 2019 providing for a paper backup to electronic ballots, a move aimed at giving Georgians more confidence their votes are being recorded accurately. But some voters have complained that the QR codes are confusing and impose a barrier on transparency.

"We need to give voters confidence ... to feel like there's transparency when they vote," Burns said.

The other potential change to election laws Burns talked about Wednesday would shift investigations of voter complaints of election fraud from the secretary of state's office to the State Election Board. Burns said such a move would help make the board more independent.

The most sweeping

changes in Georgia election laws occurred in 2021, following 2020 elections that saw Democrats capture both of the state's U.S. Senate seats and Democrat Joe Biden narrowly carry the Peach State on his way to the White House.

Senate Bill 202 that year required voters seeking to cast absentee ballots to show a photo ID, a provision that already applied to in-person voting. The 2021 measure also limits the number of absentee ballot drop boxes and prohibits non-poll workers from handing out food and drinks within 150 feet of voters standing in line.

On other issues Wednesday, Burns said he remains committed to Georgia Pathways, the limited Medicaid expansion championed by Gov. Brian Kemp that took effect last summer. Enrollment has gotten off to a slow start, but Burns said the governor has added resources aimed at getting more eligible Georgians signed up.

"It's moving in the right direction," the speaker said.

Legislative Democrats, meanwhile, are continuing to push for full-blown Medicaid expansion, which they argue would cover more Georgians at less cost.

Burns said he is looking to House members to weigh in on Republican-backed private school vouchers, legislation that failed on the House floor last year. Democrats and some



Georgia House Speaker Jon Burns

Republicans objected to taking money away from public schools to help pay for private school tuition.

"I think it's a good issue," Burns said. "It's giving Georgia families access to educational opportunities that might not be in their communities."

Burns also said he's confident the state Senate will support a mental-health bill aimed at increasing the size of the mental-health workforce in Georgia and making it easier for people who cycle between the streets, emergency rooms and jails to get the help they need.

House Bill 520, a follow-up to major mental-health reform legislation lawmakers passed two years ago, died in the Senate at the end of last year's session.

Debris injures child in suicide shooting at Brasstown Resort

By Shawn Jarrard
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YOUNG HARRIS – The Georgia Bureau of Investigation assisted the Towns County Sheriff's Office with a death investigation at the state-owned Brasstown Valley Resort & Spa on Friday, Dec. 29.

GBI has ruled the death a suicide, and an 8-year-old bystander suffered minor injuries as a result of the self-shooting.

"There was no evidence to suggest that the death was anything other than a suicide," GBI said. "The victim was an employee of the resort and died at the scene."

"A child was struck by debris from where the projectile exited the wall. The child sustained minor injuries and was treated at the scene."

The employee shot himself in an office adjacent to the resort's dining room, and the bullet exited through the office wall and into the



dining area, causing pieces of the wall to strike the child, whose parents declined medical transport, according to the Towns County Sheriff's Office.

At the scene, the GBI discovered a suicide note written by the employee, who was a resident of Hayesville, North Carolina, at the time of his death.

The Sheriff's Office requested GBI's assistance with the case due to the nature of the incident and state ownership

of the property there at 6321 Highway 76 in Young Harris.

"Brasstown Valley is owned by the State of Georgia," according to the resort website. "All 503-acres, the resort itself, and the golf course are property of the state. The resort and all of its recreational facilities are managed by Coral Hospitality."

"We employ an average of 230 employees and offer a variety of occupations and career opportunities."

Wintry Weather...from Page 1A

it heavy winds and dropping nearly 4 inches of rain on Tuesday.

Local rivers and streams reached capacity, and multiple trees fell around the county, causing power outages, though there were no major issues to report, according to Union County EMA Director David Dyer.

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC experienced widespread outages as a result of the system that rolled through the area that Monday night, and fortunately, all power outages from the storm were restored by Tuesday evening.

"At the peak of the event, BRMEMC had 84 outages affecting approximately 6,245 members (systemwide)," the EMC said. "Power restoration efforts began as soon as it was safe for crews to assess the damage and begin work, which was fairly immediately after the storm damage occurred."

"High winds and heavy rain from the storm caused the majority of the outages. Trees were blown over that snapped lines and broke five utility poles. Each county in BRMEMC's service territory was affected. In addition, heavy rain caused flooding to occur."

Initially, the School System was planning to operate with a two-hour delay on Tuesday, Jan. 9. But after reports of downed trees and power outages early Tuesday morning, the system decided to close schools to in-person instruction, implementing an online learning day for



Blue Ridge Mountain EMC linemen were able to get power up and running within 24 hours for customers who lost electricity due to the storm early last week. Photo/Facebook students.

Freezing rain began Tuesday evening as the storm system continued to move out of the area, and residents awoke to the first snow of winter – just enough to build tiny snowmen – with a light dusting on Wednesday, Jan. 10.

The wintry mix with residual precipitation on county roadways and low morning temperatures prompted the schools to keep students home a second day for more online learning that Wednesday.

As he always does with wintry weather, Commissioner Lamar Paris informed people about road

conditions on Facebook Tuesday and Wednesday morning, letting folks know that roads were mostly clear after the snow with some black ice exceptions in the north end of the county.

Then on Friday, a weaker storm system moved through the area, dropping additional rain and bringing with it more heavy winds and the slight chance for tornadoes, though again, no major issues were reported locally.

For some excellent tips on preparing for winter weather, check out EMA Director David Dyer's column in this week's Opinion pages.

STAR Students...from Page 1A



L-R: Woody Gap Principal Wendy Reynolds, Woody Gap STAR Teacher Jason Serrano, Woody Gap STAR Student Aidan Webb, UCHS STAR Student Eli Decker, UCHS STAR Teacher Jared Kelley, UCHS Principal Carol Knight and Chamber President Steve Rowe on Jan. 11. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

for two years, as his STAR Teacher.

"I haven't really taken any classes with him, but I feel like I'm learning whenever I'm in (the room with him)," Webb said.

Serrano elaborated, sharing that, as the only Spanish speaker on the Woody Gap staff, he supervises the dual-enrollment Spanish classes – even though he is not officially the teacher.

"He does dual enrollment, so he's in my classroom," Serrano explained. "I (actually) teach Social Studies grades six through 12."

Serrano met Webb in his first year teaching and was immediately impressed by both his personal and academic personas.

"He's the same guy everywhere he goes; he's got two feet on the ground and he's the same kid," Serrano said. "Sometimes you'll see some people act one way around one group of people, then they act another way around another, but he's the same everywhere he goes. He's just Aidan – unapologetically Aidan."

After high school, Webb plans to attend Kennesaw State

University to obtain a degree in computer science. For any younger students hoping to match his level of high school achievements, he advises that they study hard and review math diligently before taking the SAT.

The STAR Student and Teacher initiative is a Professional Association of Georgia Educators Foundation program meant to honor academically successful high school seniors.

"Each high school in Union County has a STAR Student, then there will be a committee that meets and selects a District STAR Student," UCHS Principal Carol Knight said. "The District STAR Student will be announced Feb. 8 at the Evening with the STARS event."

The Evening with the STARS is hosted every year by the local STAR Sponsor, the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, and Chamber President Steve Rowe met with the students at Union County High on Thursday, Jan. 11, to offer them big in-person congratulations.

As always, the awards

will take place at the Union County Community Center, this year on Thursday, Feb. 8, at 6 p.m.

Each STAR Student and Teacher is encouraged to invite their families and friends to watch them accept their awards, which will include speaking opportunities for each of the STARS being honored.

Following these speeches, the STAR Students will receive awards directly from the PAGE Foundation.

"One of (them) will be selected to go to the region (ceremony), which will be in Dahlonega," Rowe said. "It will probably be not more than a week or two after our presentation, and we will announce who the region winner is at that banquet."

If either Decker or Webb achieve Region STAR Student, they will progress to a competition at the state level.

Along with the STAR awards on Feb. 8, the chamber will be handing out several other honors to different students, alumni and teachers for their exemplary performance and representation of Union County Schools.